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NEWS

Winchester's Kelley Bernard is the 'Belle of the Brawl' at charity boxing event

CHRIS STEVENS | CORRESPONDENT

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Winchester native Kelley Bernard will be fighting cancer at the Haymakers for Hope 'Belles of the Brawl' charity event on Oct. 10. COURTESY PHOTO/HAYMAKERS FOR HOPE

There was a time when cancer had Kelley Bernard on the ropes, b
Thursday she won't be pulling any punches when she steps into th

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for Haymakers for Hope's 11 annual Belles of the Brawl Boxing Charity Event, aimed at raising money for a cure.

"I feel pretty good," said Bernard, who grew up in Winchester. "I went into the whole experience thinking I'm going to put everything into this, I want to have no regrets and that's pretty much how I feel."

Let's be clear, Bernard was not a boxer. It was her fiancé who got her started on the path when he received an email about a program Haymakers was trying to launch that was just for cancer survivors.

"Basically, I was a freshman at Winchester High School and had some minor illnesses over the winter, wasn't feeling my best," said Bernard, who is now 32.

She credits her mother for pushing doctors to look deeper when Bernard's lab work started to show a slow decline in her white blood cell count.

"Finally, she said can we just see a blood specialist so if we know what's going on, we can fix it," Bernard said.

In her mind, Bernard said she had already decided that she and everyone else were being overly dramatic and she probably had mono. Then the hematologist told her otherwise.

"She met with me and said, 'This is what I think it is. It's either bone marrow failure or leukemia,'" Bernard said. "Those were my two options and I was admitted the next day."

That led to two long years of treatment and eventually to a career as a pediatric oncology nurse. When asked if she had thought of being a nurse before she was forced to grapple with cancer, Bernard said no.

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"Honestly, I don't even know what I was thinking before all this ... I think I was entertaining everything," she said. "Then having gone through this, it was like 'Yeah, there's actually no other option for me. This is what I'm meant to be doing.'"

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So when her fiancé said she should look into the "Fight Continued" program, a 16-week no-contact intro to boxing, she did. The program is designed to help boost immunity and overall well-being and any survivor can participate.

Bernard said there is no experience needed and fitness levels don't matter.

"I signed up for it and the gym where it was being offered is like five minutes away from us in Watertown," she said. "So I went to the first day and I just completely fell in love with it."

So much so she segued from that program right into the annual Belles of the Brawl event, which has been a little more intense than the no-contact intro to boxing.

Training

Bernard said she's been training since mid-May, which means she's been on what she called a "super high protein nutritional journey," had no alcohol and has been working out once and sometimes twice a day.

"It's been an experience for sure," she said.

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And her fiancé, who had his own Haymaker fight two years ago, got realistic with her from the start.

"He said it was a lot of work, a big commitment, you're going to get punched in the face, you're going to have to punch someone else in the face, that's the reality of it," she said, with a chuckle.

And since, she said she is someone who was once told all the reasons not to do something — she was all in.

After almost five months of training, Bernard said she doesn't think there is anything more she could do to prepare, "so right now, I feel pretty good."

The big event

She admits she is nervous about her time in the ring, but is super excited about the whole event. She said she attended her fiance's Haymakers fight night and it was unlike any event she'd ever been to and it was about much more than just boxing.

"Yeah, there's these boxing matches going on, and I don't want to say it doesn't matter who wins or who loses, but everyone who goes into the ring, everyone is cheering for them and celebrating them and everyone who leaves the ring everyone is congratulating them because every person who does this has a reason, has raised all this money and survived the training," she said. "So I'm nervous for the six minutes I'll be in the ring and actually fighting, but I'm excited for the actual night and to celebrate with everybody and have a margarita afterward."

When asked if she'll continue to box after the Oct. 10 event, Bernard said 100% yes. She said she's fallen into the lifestyle and she couldn't imagine stopping now.

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Actually, there probably isn't much that could stop Bernard now — or ever.

Haymakers for Hope

Since having its first event in 2011, Haymakers for Hope has raised over $32 million for cancer research, awareness, survivorship, and care. The window is still open for donations to Bernard's fundraising efforts.

You can make a donation and hear more of her story in her own words here.

Want to participate in a Haymaker Brawl or join the first-ever post treatment survivorship training program: Fight Continued, or get tickets to Thursday's event at MGM Music Hall at Fenway, go to www.haymakersforhope.org for more information.

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By Talia Ho | Correspondent Fame. Fortune. And all that jazz. This spring, Winchester High School presents "Chicago: Teen Edition," a bold musical that explores celebrity culture, media manipulation, and the cost of ambition. This iconic production is set in the 1920s. Performances will take place on March 13 and 14

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March 4, 2026

Welcome Here'

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